

POP HEALTH CENTRAL NEWSLETTER

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POPULATION HEALTH IN ACTION

Community-Guided Research: Advancing Health Equity Through Partnership

Contributing Authors: Diane Hagerman, Executive Director, Rutgers Equity Alliance for Community Health

Some of the most meaningful research doesn't start with a hypothesis; it starts with a conversation. Across New Jersey, Rutgers faculty are sitting at community tables, listening to residents, learning from lived experience, and shaping projects together. When research is guided by the people closest to the issue, the work becomes sharper, more relevant, and more sustainable.

This idea is at the heart of the [Rutgers Equity Alliance for Community Health \(REACH\)](#). Active in New Brunswick, Camden, and Newark, REACH supports researchers working with community-based organizations to co-design solutions. Rather than approaching a neighborhood with a pre-determined plan, Rutgers' colleagues ask: What matters most to you? And how can we address that together?

Below are three examples of how REACH-funded projects evolved because of community leadership. These projects share a simple truth: research becomes transformative when the community is not the subject of the work, but the partner in it.



From left to right: Pamela Rothpletz-Puglia, Nicole Cannon, & Ashley Hynes

Unhoused in New Brunswick

Principal Investigator: [Eric Seymour](#)

Seymour's team spent time in conversation with individuals experiencing homelessness, advocates, and local organizations. Instead of drafting a report in isolation, the researchers invited community partners into editing sessions to refine the findings and ensure the recommendations reflected real needs and lived wisdom. Read the full report, ["Homeless in New Brunswick and Programs to Address,"](#) online.

Dismantling the "Kids' Food" Archetype

Principal Investigator: [Pamela Rothpletz-Puglia](#)

This project questioned why "kids' food" in the U.S. so often means ultra-processed, low-nutrient options. Through a photovoice project, families documented their food environments and shared personal reflections. The resulting exhibit prompted conversations about marketing, access, and culture — and shifted perceptions in powerful ways. [Review the "Kids' Food" Exhibit online.](#)

Transitional Housing Partners with Food Access Initiative

Principal Investigator: [Veronica Jones](#)

At Hope Village II in Newark, residents wanted more than food access — they wanted ownership. Working alongside Al-Munir Consulting LLC, the project built a greenhouse and launched a resident-led garden club. Participants learned to grow, harvest, and cook fresh produce, while forming relationships and pride in a shared space. Surveys showed increased confidence and knowledge across all topics. View the ["Hope Village II Garden Club"](#) video online which illustrates a deeper dive of this work.

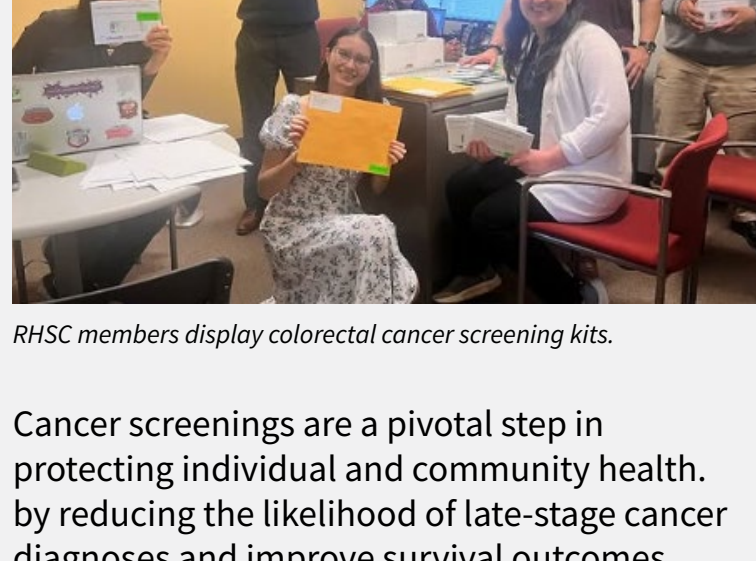
Rutgers Health Service Corps: Leading the Colorectal Cancer Screening Charge

Contributing Authors: Horacio Hernandez, Population Health Fellow, Office of Population Health and John (Jack) Hemphill, Program Manager & Director, Rutgers Health Service Corps, Office of Population Health

The [Rutgers Health Service Corps \(RHSC\)](#) continues to make a meaningful impact across Rutgers Health through a wide range of initiatives this past academic semester. One of the most significant efforts has focused on improving colorectal cancer (CRC) screening rates across Rutgers Health practices.

RHSC students have played a vital role in increasing CRC screening among patients at the [Eric B. Chandler Health Center](#), a local Federally Qualified Health Center, by assembling and distributing more than 2,500 home stool-based colorectal cancer screening kits. Students also conducted follow-up calls to remind patients to complete and return their test kits. This project was recently presented at the annual [American Public Health Association National Meeting](#) in Washington, D.C.

In addition, we collaborated with the Rutgers RWJ Medical School General Internal Medicine practice and RWJBarnabas Health Population Health program to identify patients who were not up to date on CRC screening. By sending providers lists of their panel of patients who were overdue for screening, tracking tests ordered, and monitoring completion with support from RHSC students, this quality improvement project led to a 9% increase in CRC screening rates—from 73% to 82%.



RHSC members display colorectal cancer screening kits.

Cancer screenings are a pivotal step in protecting individual and community health. By reducing the likelihood of late-stage cancer diagnoses and improve survival outcomes. These initiatives exemplify how RHSC members and our Office of Population Health can advance preventive care and strengthen health outcomes. Read the article on how Rutgers students are improving colorectal cancer screening.

This program is seeking partnerships to expand this initiative and improve CRC screening rates at other clinics. Interested in partnering? Reach out to us at rhsc@rbhs.rutgers.edu.

Rutgers Health Service Corps Launches Health Policy & Advocacy Speaker Series

Contributing Authors: Brandi Blackshear, Special Projects Coordinator, Office of Population Health, and Erin Scott, Population Health Fellow, Office of Population Health

The Rutgers Health Policy & Advocacy Corps (HPAC), recently established through funding from the Rutgers Democracy Lab Faculty and Staff Associates Program, is a health policy and advocacy training focused extension of the Rutgers Health Service Corps. HPAC's mission is to prepare future healthcare and public health professionals to engage in the democratic process, understand how policy is developed and implemented, and advocate for change that advances population health. Through interdisciplinary learning and applied opportunities, HPAC aims to build a pipeline of civically engaged, policy-savvy leaders across Rutgers' health schools.

As part of this mission, HPAC started a new Speaker Series to give students and other Rutgers Health faculty and staff opportunities to hear directly from leaders shaping health policy at the state and national levels. These online webinars feature curated question-and-answer discussions led by our three inaugural HPAC Health Policy & Advocacy Interns: Matthew Milewski, MBA, MSN, BSN, RN, Psychiatric-Mental Health Nurse Practitioner and DNP Candidate at the Rutgers School of Nursing; Gurleen Kaur, MPH student in Social and Behavioral Health Sciences at the Rutgers School of Public Health; and Michael Khalil, Pharm.D. Candidate at the Ernest Mario School of Pharmacy.

This fall, HPAC hosted three distinguished speakers. Dr. Novneet Sahu, Deputy Commissioner of Public Health Services for the New Jersey Department of Health, opened the series by discussing the transition from academia to governmental public health and how to engage with policy "hot topics." Christine Stearns, JD, Chief Government Relations Officer for the New Jersey Hospital Association, provided an inside look at legislative strategy, coalition building, and healthcare advocacy. Heather Howard, JD, Director of State Health and Value Strategies and former New Jersey Commissioner of Health, closed the series by sharing her extensive state and federal policy experience and underscoring the importance of preparing emerging health professionals to shape equitable and effective health systems.

The HPAC speaker series drew attendees from a range of backgrounds, including students, academic researchers, healthcare providers, and administrators at all career stages. Evaluation feedback indicated that participants valued gaining a clear understanding of the priorities and values of NJDOH, the difference between advocacy and lobbying,

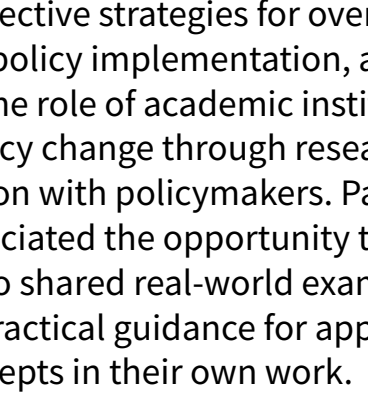
HPAC Series Speakers



Novneet Sahu, MD
Deputy Commissioner of Public Health Services for the New Jersey Department of Health



Christine Stearns, JD
Chief Government Relations Officer for the New Jersey Hospital Association



Heather Howard, JD
Director of State Health and Value Strategies; Former New Jersey Commissioner of Health

learning effective strategies for overcoming barriers in policy implementation, and exploring the role of academic institutions in driving policy change through research and collaboration with policymakers. Participants most appreciated the opportunity to learn from leaders who shared real-world examples and provided practical guidance for applying health policy concepts in their own work.

Reimagining Leadership by Centering Voice, Community, and Courage

Contributing Authors: Joanna Jenkins, Research Scholar-Leadership Coach, The Samuel Dewitt Proctor Institute for Leadership, Equity and Justice & Marybeth Gasman, and Samuel DeWitt Proctor Endowed Chair in Education, Associate Dean for Research in Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University

Workplaces are changing fast, yet far too many women of color still feel like they are pushing uphill just to be seen and heard. In our new report, [Reimagining Leadership Through Self-Advocacy, Networks, and Feedback](#), we look closely at how women of color navigate careers shaped by bias, shifting expectations, and constant scrutiny. We listened to women who have had to build resilience in environments that too often question their expertise, tone, decision-making, and leadership. Their insights point to something powerful: when women of color advocate for themselves, connect across difference, and insist on meaningful feedback, they not only advance their own careers but help positively reshape workplace culture for everyone.

Many participants described balancing strength with diplomacy, only to be told they were either too quiet or too assertive. They talked about speaking up to protect their teams before feeling able to speak up for themselves. They underscored the emotional labor of managing tone, navigating difficult bosses, and bracing for judgment. They also shared what helped them thrive: defining success on their own terms, trusted peer networks, mentors who genuinely invest in them, and leaders who recognize their expertise rather than police it.

Our recommendations are rooted in practices that should be standard in organizations committed to equity. These practices include building intentional sponsorship programs for women of color, offering culturally grounded feedback training for managers, and ensuring transparent pathways for advancement. We also emphasize the importance of documenting achievements, creating cross-generational support, and embedding self-advocacy skills into leadership development programs.

Our work reminds us that leadership is not simply about titles. It is about voice, agency, relationships, and community. Organizations benefit when women of color are empowered to advocate for themselves and others as they bring clarity, innovation, and empathy to moments of uncertainty and change.

As we move into a future shaped by new technologies, evolving work models, and diverse leadership, we owe it to our communities to design workplaces where women of color do more than survive.

POPULATION HEALTH NEWS

Transforming Health: Rutgers Institute for Corporate Social Innovation Honors Danielle Mitchell and Novo Nordisk

Contributing Author: Jeana Wirtenberg, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Professional Practice & Executive Director, Rutgers Institute for Corporate Social Innovation (RICSI)

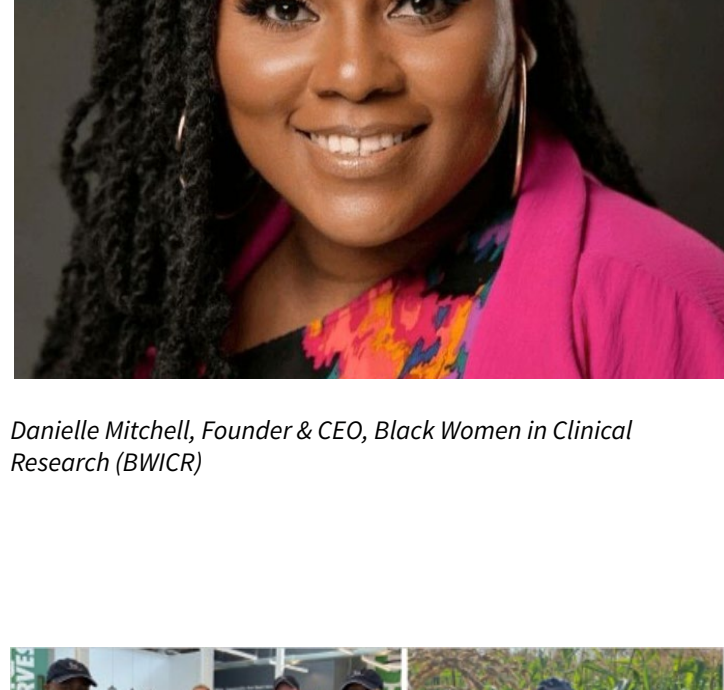
The [Rutgers Institute for Corporate Social Innovation \(RICSI\)](#) continues to celebrate leaders who exemplify business as a force for good through its inaugural [Corporate Social Innovation \(CSI\) Excellence Awards](#). This second installment spotlights Danielle Mitchell, recipient of the CSI Pioneer Award, and Novo Nordisk, honored for its comprehensive commitment to health equity and population health.



Changemaker Award Recipient: Adam Mat, Ph.D. Photo courtesy of the Rutgers Institute for Corporate Social Innovation (RICSI)

CSI Pioneer Award: Danielle Mitchell, Founder & CEO, Black Women in Clinical Research (BWICR)

[Danielle Mitchell](#) has transformed the landscape of diversity and inclusion in the clinical research field. As Founder and CEO of [Black Women in Clinical Research \(BWICR\)](#), she leads a thriving global community of more than 30,000 members across its affiliates—Black Men in Clinical Research (BMICR) and Minorities in Clinical Research (MICR). Her organization's mission is rooted in equity, mentorship, and access—providing professional guidance, fostering education, and opening pathways for underrepresented groups in clinical science. Under her leadership, BWICR has built partnerships with the White House HBCU Initiative and Clark Atlanta University, launched mentorship programs that have supported thousands, and amplified the importance of representation in clinical trials. A Black Health Connect 40 Under 40 Honoree, Mitchell's visionary leadership continues to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion in health research, empowering a new generation to shape a more just and representative scientific community. Learn more about [Danielle Mitchell's work](#) and impact by visiting her story.



Danielle Mitchell, Founder & CEO, Black Women in Clinical Research (BWICR)

CSI Excellence Award: Novo Nordisk, Inc. — Driving Change Across the Continuum of Care

[Novo Nordisk Inc.](#), embodies RICSI's mission of aligning profit with purpose through its holistic approach to combating chronic disease. Beyond developing treatments, the company invests in prevention and food equity initiatives that strengthen local food systems and improve community health. In 2025, Novo Nordisk marked three years of partnership with [Share My Meals](#), delivering thousands of meals across New Jersey while reducing food waste. The company also co-founded the [Meal Recovery Coalition](#), mobilized 2,300 employees in 43 states for its annual Day of Service, and co-hosted the New Jersey School Food Summit to advance nutrition equity. Through these initiatives, Novo Nordisk demonstrates that advancing population health requires more than medicine—it demands community-rooted collaboration and systems-level change.



Snapshots of Novo Nordisk in action, serving communities, advancing health, and promoting equity.

MINDFULNESS CORNER

The Power of the Pause

Presented by the Office of Promotion of Well-Being

The power of the pause lies in its ability to interrupt our automatic reactions and create a moment of spaciousness. In that brief stillness, we can reconnect with our breath, our intentions, and a few truly matters, allowing us to respond rather than react. Even a what seconds of mindful pausing can shift the tone of an interaction, steady our emotions, and ground us in clarity and presence. Please feel free to visit the [Office of Well-Being's website](#) to learn more about their work.



Photo courtesy of AdobeStock.

UPCOMING EVENTS

NJENA 47th Annual Emergency Care Conference

The [New Jersey State Council of the Emergency Nurses Association \(NJENA\)](#) will be hosting their annual conference from March 18 to 20 at the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino in Atlantic City, NJ. The conference will have speakers and sessions that highlight the most current evidence-based practices, treatments, and emerging trends within emergency nursing. Some of the topics covered will range from Pediatrics, Community & Advocacy, Behavioral Health and Staff Wellbeing & Safety. For more information on NJENA, please visit the website.

2026 Pennsylvania Health Equity Summit

The Pennsylvania Department of Health, Office of Health Equity will be hosting the [2026 Health Equity Summit: Dialogue to Action: Partnering to Transform Communities](#) on April 16 at the Normandy Farm Hotel & Conference Center in Blue Bell, PA. This event is focused on connecting key stakeholders from various sectors and disciplines to come together to share solutions and ideas that move towards eliminating health disparities in Pennsylvania by 2030. For more information, please visit the website.

NJEPA 27th Annual Conference

The New Jersey Emergency Preparedness Association will be hosting their [annual conference](#) from April 20 to 24 at the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino in Atlantic City, NJ. This conference is focused as a platform to advance the education and development of emergency preparedness among public health, fire service, and emergency management professional throughout the United States. For more information, please visit the website.

UPCOMING HEALTH OBSERVANCES

January

- National Glaucoma Awareness Month
- National Blood Donor Month
- Maternal Health Awareness Day (Jan 23)

February

- American Heart Month
- National Cancer Prevention Month
- National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day (Feb 7)
- National Cardiac Rehabilitation Week (Feb 11-17)

March

- National Nutrition Month
- National Colorectal Cancer Month
- Brain Injury Awareness Month
- HPV Awareness Day (March 4)
- National Women and Girls HIV/AIDS Awareness Day (March 10)

April

- Sexual Assault Awareness & Prevention Month
- Alcohol Awareness Month
- National Minority Health Month
- National Public Health Week

Join the Conversation!

Interested in contributing to our next newsletter?

Email us at vcph@rbhs.rutgers.edu.

Population Health, Office of Clinical and Health Affairs